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"All the Brains I Can Borrow": Woodrow Wilson and Intelligence Gathering in Mexico, 1913–15

Mark E. Benbow

> ***"Wilson's efforts to cobble together information about Mexico's revolution illustrate some of the difficulties presidents faced when gathering intelligence before a more formal intelligence-gathering structure was established."***

A mere two weeks before Woodrow Wilson became president of the United States, Mexico's Gen. Victoriano Huerta overthrew his country's elected president, Francisco Madero, who would later be assassinated. Wilson was concerned because he feared that foreign policy issues might prove a distraction from the domestic reform measures he wanted to pass through Congress. In fact, during the period 1913–15, Mexico was one of Wilson's main foreign policy concerns, and after June 1914 it was second only to the war in Europe.[1]

Throughout this period, Wilson struggled not only with forming a policy toward Mexico but more fundamentally with learning what was happening in Mexico's revolution. Wilson did not believe he could trust his usually primary source of information, the Department of State. Instead of relying on diplomatic reporting, Wilson cobbled together a network of formal and informal sources to observe and report on events.

In the process, Wilson's efforts illustrate some of the difficulties presidents faced when gathering intelligence for policymaking before a more formal intelligence-gathering structure was established with the Coordinator of Information in 1941.[2]

Confronted with the revolution in a neighboring country, Wilson had to judge numerous parties in an ever-changing political and military situation as each faction vied for support inside Mexico and from the United States. In this paper, I will examine the types of intelligence Wilson used to evaluate events in Mexico, their limitations and their strengths, and how Wilson identified and dealt

[1] The title is drawn from Woodrow Wilson, "Remarks to the National Press Club," 20 March 1914 in Arthur Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson.* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979) 29:363. Hereafter referred to as PWW followed by volume and page numbers. The full quote reads, "I not only use all the brains I have, but all I can borrow."

[2] The office was created by Franklin Roosevelt in July 1941. Headed by William J. Donovan, it was a civilian office attached to the White House. It was succeeded by the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) in 1942.

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with bias among his sources. I will also examine how Wilson evaluated the information from his various informants. In short, how did Wilson, as a consumer of intelligence, deal with the issues normally presented to intelligence collectors and analysts?

Of the numerous types of intelligence, or "INTs," as they are recognized by the Intelligence Community today, some, such as MASINT (Measurement And Signatures Intelligence) rely on technology that did not exist in 1913 while others, IMINT (Imagery Intelligence) and SIGINT (Signals Intelligence) were of limited use during the crisis in Mexico. SIGINT was used for counterintelligence purposes during this period, and it would be useful again later, in 1916 during Pershing's intervention to catch Pancho Villa, but it was of little value in supporting the political analysis Wilson needed during 1913–15. The other major INTs, HUMINT (Human Intelligence) and OSINT (Open Source Intelligence) both played important roles in Wilson's informal intelligence network. But how useful were these types of sources, and how reliable did they prove to be for Wilson? [3]

HUMINT was Wilson's most valuable source. Traditionally, presidents before Wilson received their information about overseas events through the State Department. This took the form of reports from ambassadors, ministers, and consuls. Consuls were often US citizens already living overseas, usually for business purposes, rather than foreign service professionals. Consuls received stipends, official titles, and reported on events in their regions and promoted US businesses in their area.

Cables sent by US diplomats in Mexico City and by consuls around the country were received in the State Department, then located in the Executive Office Building next to the White House. In the department they would be hand-carried to the geographical divisions within the building and to the Division of Information, a predecessor of the current Bureau of Intelligence and Research. If judged to be of sufficient importance, a cable could then be forwarded to the secretary of state or to an undersecretary, or even to the president.[4]

The many conflicting perspectives flowing into Washington from US representatives in Mexico during the crisis only clouded the president's view of events there. The ambassador and the consuls all had their own interpretations of what was happening. Some praised Huerta. Others lauded the revolutionaries, known as the "Constitutionalists." As a result, President Wilson came to distrust much of the diplomatic reporting from Mexico. But he especially distrusted the reports of his ambassador.

The US ambassador in Mexico City, Henry Lane Wilson, was a conservative Republican

[3] Today, IMINT commonly brings to mind satellite photography, but it also includes ground photography, which was well within 1913 technological capabilities. However, it was normally used by the War Department for tactical planning in which Wilson did not engage.

President Wilson (seated) with his private secretary, Joseph Tumulty, a key gatekeeper in passing information to the president. (© Bettmann/CORBIS)

[4] The United States maintained approximately 20 consulates in Mexico during this period.

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and an appointee of Wilson's predecessor, William Howard Taft. Ambassador Wilson strongly advocated US recognition of the Huerta government. He also actively assisted the plotters who overthrew President Madero in February 1913.

Wilson's "Confidential Men"

Just three days after President Wilson was inaugurated on 4 March 1913, the New York *World* published a front page story revealing Ambassador Wilson's role in Huerta's coup. The *World* was the president's strongest supporter in the press and it was the newspaper he most trusted. The *World's* report reinforced the president's decision to delay recognition of Huerta's government, despite the ambassador's strenuous lobbying. Also as a result of the *World's* reports, President Wilson considered any information coming from the US embassy in Mexico to be tainted.[5]

Presented with conflicting information and distrustful of State reporting, Wilson looked for more reliable sources. First he turned to a reporter, William Bayard Hale, who had been

Hale confirmed Woodrow Wilson's worst fears...[the coup leader] acted only because he had the active support of US Ambassador Wilson.

an Episcopalian priest. Hale wrote for the progressive journal *World's Work* and had written Wilson's campaign biography in 1912. Hale would become the first of several reporters, or "confidential men," picked to go to Mexico to get the "exact facts." The president asked Hale to "tour" the Latin American states—even though he spoke no Spanish—"ostensibly on your own hook" and report "just what is going on down there."[6]

Hale reached Mexico City on 24 May, accompanied by rumors that he was there to investigate the New York *World's* reports. Hale denied the rumors and claimed that he was only there to research a series of magazine articles. President Wilson also issued a statement denying that Hale was investigating Ambassador Wilson's role in the coup. The type of information Hale reported to the president indicated that he probably did seek information about Ambassador Wilson's role in the February 1913 coup, but the president also sought information on Huerta's legitimacy.

Hale sent his first report to the President Wilson on 18 June 1913. His conclusions confirmed Wilson's worst fears. President Madero was overthrown in a coup begun by those opposed to his reforms. The coup would have failed if Gen. Huerta, Madero's own commander, had not betrayed him. To make matters worse, Huerta acted only because he had the active support of Ambassador Wilson. Hale's report indicated that the official US representative, in fact,

The US ambassador to Mexico, Henry Lane Wilson. (© CORBIS)

[5] In retrospect, the *World's* reporting on Ambassador Wilson's activities was accurate, notwithstanding his denials. Compare New York *World*, 7–9 March 1913 with Alan Knight's discussion of events in *The Mexican Revolution, Volume I, Porfirians, Liberals and Peasants* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 484–90.

[6] Woodrow Wilson to William Bayard Hale, 19 April 1913, PWW 27:335. Unbeknownst to Wilson, Hale was employed by the Japanese government in an effort to influence American press coverage of Japan. (Jessie Lyon, "Diplomatic Relations Between the United States, Mexico, and Japan: 1913–1917," [Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont College, 1975], 6–7, 19.) This relationship did not appear to have affected Hale's reporting on Mexico, however. See Larry Hill, *Emissaries to a Revolution: Woodrow Wilson's Executive Agents in Mexico.* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973), 25–26.

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The ambassador sought to undermine the Wilson administration's policy by trying to create the specter of armed intervention.

had engaged in a plot against an elected government and was directly responsible for the coup's success. As Hale wrote,

> *There was not a moment during [the coup] when it would not have been possible to end the distressing situation [and] put a stop to this unnecessary bloodshed by a stern warning from the American embassy to the traitorous army officers that the United States would countenance no methods but peaceful constitutional ones.... President Madero was not betrayed and arrested by his officers until it had been asserted that the American ambassador had no objection.*

Hale concluded that "thousands of Mexicans believe that the Ambassador acted on instructions from Washington and looked upon his retention under the new American President as a mark of approval, blaming the United States for the chaos into which [Mexico] has fallen."[7]

Hale also revealed how the ambassador sought to undermine the Wilson administration's policy by trying to create the specter of armed intervention by suggesting that Wilson's policies would inevitably lead to a war in Mexico. Moreover, Hale reported, Ambassador Wilson was noisily attacking President Wilson's administration calling it "a pack of vicious fools." As for Huerta, Hale described him as "an ape-like old man...said to subsist on alcohol"[8] and interested in holding power only for the abuses the position allowed him to inflict.[9]

Suspecting what the reporter was doing, Ambassador Wilson attacked Hales' reports in embassy cables to Washington. Falling back on the tactic he used against Madero in his messages to the Taft administration, the ambassador attacked his adversary's [Hale's] sanity: "His mind appears to me to be unevenly balanced." Furthermore, the ambassador continued, while "some" [like Hale] were trying to describe Madero as "a martyr to democratic ideals," the former Mexican president had actually been corrupt and robbed his own government, emptying the country's treasury. The ambassador concluded one of his messages by claiming that "all of the true and secret history of [Madero's] brief rule in Mexico and prior thereto is known to no one but to me."[10]

On the basis of Hale's reports, President Wilson recalled Ambassador Wilson in mid-July 1913 to confer with him and Secretary of State Bryan. The ambassador arrived in Washington ready to personally lobby the administration to extend formal recognition to Huerta's regime. Wilson and Bryan listened for an hour to the man the president once called "that unspeakable person." As he spoke, Ambassador Wilson realized that his audience was only giving him cursory attention, and he resigned soon after the meeting. His resignation left Nelson O'Shaughnessy as the US representative in charge at the embassy. However, O'Shaughnessy was also on friendly terms with Huerta, and his reporting remained tainted in the president's estimation, although Wilson considered him "honest," if somewhat biased.[11]

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[7] A Report by William Bayard Hale, 18 June 1913, PWW 27:536-552. Hale's sources included American businessmen in Mexico City, members of the Mexican government, and several members of the US embassy staff. Not all of his sources were identified. See Hill, 25–29.

[8] There is no direct evidence of the reaction William Jennings Bryan, Wilson's secretary of state and a dedicated prohibitionist, might have had to this line. Hale may have aimed his statement at the secretary, knowing it would influence his view of Huerta.

[9] William Bayard Hale to Ben Davis, 15 July 1913, PWW, Series 2; cable from William Bayard Hale, 15 July 1913, PWW, Series 2; Hale, "Memoranda on Affairs in Mexico," 9 July 1913, PWW 28:31.

[10] Henry Lane Wilson to Woodrow Wilson, 1 July 1913, WWP, Series 2.

[11] Woodrow Wilson to Cleveland Hoadley Dodge, 21 July 1913, PWW 28:58; Woodrow Wilson to Ellen Axson Wilson, 25 July 1913, PWW 28:85; Henry Lane Wilson, *Diplomatic Episodes in Mexico and Chile* (New York: Doubleday, Page & Co. 1927), 312–14; Wilson to Bryan, 3 July 1913, PWW 28:22.

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Hale remained in Mexico, reporting first from Mexico City and then from Constitutionalist territory in northern Mexico, until January 1914.

Hale had been joined in August 1913 by John Lind, a former governor of Minnesota and member of the US House of Representatives. Like Hale, Lind spoke no Spanish and carried strong Protestant, anti-Catholic prejudices into the overwhelmingly Catholic Mexico. Unlike Hale, however, Lind was empowered to negotiate with Mexican officials. Wilson had instructed Lind to press Huerta's government for "an immediate cessation of fighting throughout Mexico," an "early and free election" in which all parties could participate, a promise from Huerta not to be a candidate, and an agreement by all parties to respect the results of the election. In return, the United States promised to recognize the newly elected government. The Huerta regime met with Lind but refused to accede to Wilson's demands.[12]

Lind left Mexico City for the port of Veracruz, where he continued to gather information and report to Washington. Lind sent his reports to Wilson via official cable channels. His reports were a mixture of HUMINT and OSINT. Lind's data came from human sources, including some who did not wish to be identified, and from the Mexican press. Lind also met with diplomats of other countries anxious to pass their impressions of Mexico to Washington.

The material Wilson received was a blend of analysis and raw data. His representatives not only told him what they had learned but also included their judgments and recommendations.

Lind was prone to trying to influence policy by suggesting courses of action; seeking to direct, in addition to informing. In the spring of 1914, Lind urged Wilson to intervene militarily in Veracruz, assuring Wilson that US troops would be greeted as liberators. Wilson usually disregarded such suggestions and concentrated on the information his agents reported.

Veracruz proved to be an exception, however. Wilson accepted Lind's judgment that "To dispose of the present regular army will be an easy task. If the officers in command 'break ranks' and say 'shoo' they will scatter and never be heard of again except as inmates of jails and almshouses," and the president authorized an occupation of Veracruz. When Mexican civilians resisted the occupation, which resulted in the deaths of 19 Americans and several hundred Mexicans, Wilson was shocked. After that experience, he viewed such analysis more skeptically, and Lind's influence was sharply curtailed. [13]

Other Sources

Wilson's other "confidential men" were openly known to be US representatives, despite some like Hale, who acted under a thin cover story. They all solicited information from official and unofficial sources alike, meeting with Mexican government officials and revolutionary leaders as well as with unofficial supporters and opponents of the Huerta regime. The material they sent to Wilson was a blend of analysis and raw data. His representatives not only told him what they had learned but also included their judgments and sometimes recommendations for action.

Wilson did not rely solely on his confidential men. He also

[12] Instructions to John Lind, 4 August 1913, PWW 28:110-111; see also a copy of Lind's instructions with edits in Wilson's hand, Ray S. Baker Papers, LC. Lind's instructions were leaked to the press, apparently from within the State Department, and appeared in print before Lind arrived in Mexico. See *The New York Times*, 5 August 1913. Reporters at the time had easy access to State Department offices and often freely read cables from overseas; Hill, 90–93.

[13] John Lind to the Secretary of State, 4 November 1913, Lind Papers, Reel 2; Lind to Bryan, 24 February 1914, PWW 29:287. An official count was never made of Mexican casualties. Under the hot Veracruz sun, both sides disposed of the dead as quickly as possible. The Americans piled Mexican dead in public squares near the docks, and burned them. Robert E. Quirk, *An Affair of Honor: Woodrow Wilson and the Occupation of Veracruz* (New York: Norton, 1967), 53.

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sought information from businessmen and friends with contacts in Mexico. He read unsolicited reports from people trying to influence his policies. He received a flood of mail from many unofficially credentialed, self-credentialed, and non-credentialed representatives, all aimed at garnering Wilson's support for the Mexican leader of their choice. Potentially useful material flooded the White House mail room along with a profusion of crank mail. The president's secretary, Joseph Tumulty, sorted through it all and forwarded a large representative sample to Wilson.[14]

Wilson's Analytical Method

Wilson used all these sources to search for consistent elements in a plethora of information to eliminate his own uncertainties about which Mexican revolutionary faction to support. He believed that pieces of truth would fit together as a whole. The trick was to tease the facts from the propaganda and lies in a rudimentary form of content analysis. As he noted in early 1915,

> *Things that are not so do not match. If you hear enough of them, you see there is no pattern whatever; it is a crazy quilt, whereas the truth always matches, piece by piece, with other parts of the truth. No man can lie consistently, and he cannot lie about everything if he talks to you too long. I would guarantee that if enough liars talked to you, you would get the truth; because the parts that they did not invent would match each other, and the parts that they did invent would* not *match one another. Talk long enough, therefore, and see the connections clearly enough, and you can patch together the case as a whole. I had somewhat that experience about Mexico, and that was about the only way in which I learned anything that was true about it, for there had been vivid imaginations and many special interests which depicted things as they wished me to believe them to be.*[15]

This sorting of information for consistency applied to the press as well as to the mail Wilson received. He distrusted much of the Washington press corps. As he wrote to a friend in September 1913,

> *Do not believe anything you read in the papers. If you read the papers I see, they are utterly untrustworthy.... Read the editorial page and you will know what you will find in the news columns. For unless they are grossly careless the two always support each other. Their lying is shameless and colossal!*[16]

Wilson held the press of William Randolph Hearst in particular contempt. The Hearst papers were among the loudest of those trying to influence Wilson's Mexico policy, with the New York *American* and the *San Francisco Examiner* leading the way. These papers regularly brandished lurid headlines to discredit the Constitutionalists, accusing them of a wide range of atrocities, including murder, looting and rape. At one point, Hearst's New York *American* published photos of children playing on a beach in British Honduras–photos that had originally appeared in the *New York Tribune* in 1912–with a caption falsely claiming they were children in Mexico lined up to be shot by revolutionaries, "proof of an almost unbelievable state of barbarity." Wilson ignored such reports. He had little use for Hearst, but the stories contaminated the public debate and so may have influenced

[14] Some of the crank mail can still be found in Wilson's papers with his notes on them. These provide the best evidence that he had perused some of the letters himself. It is likely Tumulty gave him selected material as entertainment as well as to improve the president's perspective on Mexico. See for example, Sidney A. Witherbee to Wilson, 10 November 1913; Witherbee to Wilson, 14 November 1913, both in WWP Series 4, Case 95. Witherbee, who may have been an entrepreneur with interests in the country, tried unsuccessfully to convince Secretary of State Bryan to send him to Mexico to kill Huerta. There were also warnings to the president about a conspiracy by the pope, protestants, Masons, or Jews, depending on the writer's personal prejudices.

[15] Woodrow Wilson, "An Address to the United States Chamber of Commerce," 3 February 1915, PWW 32:180. Emphasis in the original.

[16] Wilson to Mary Allen Hulbert, 21 September 1913, PWW 28:311.

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reports Wilson received from other sources.[17]

Throughout the crisis, the notable exception to Wilson's attitude toward the press remained the New York *World*. Wilson wrote to the *World's* publisher, Ralph Pulitzer, in 1914,

> *Let me say that every day I open the editorial page of the* World *expecting to find what I do, a real vision of things as they are.*

Wilson also held the Springfield (Massachusetts) *Republican* in high regard. Secretary Tumulty pasted together long sheets with selected editorials and stories from other newspapers for Wilson's reading. But, while Wilson discounted much of the press coverage on Mexico, a small group of reporters—perceived to be accurate—were called to Washington for personal interviews with Wilson. In this select group was *World* reporter John Reed, who met Wilson in 1914 to give the president his first hand impressions. Reed emphasized the revolution as a justified fight against powerful landowners and a corrupt Catholic Church, and he painted Pancho Villa in a very positive light. Wilson told his ambassador to Britain to read Reed's articles on Mexico because he "had it right."[18]

Wilson did not trust reporting from businessmen with interests in Mexico because of their biases.

Much less reliable as sources for Wilson were American businessmen who tended to back whichever faction posed the least threat to their property or whichever faction their business rivals opposed. For example, American mine owners, the dominant US business in Mexico, generally favored Pancho Villa because he controlled much of the area in which US-owned mines were located and he had promised to protect the mines so long as their owners advanced him large "loans."

The Phelps-Dodge Corporation, headed by Wilson's good friend from Princeton, Cleveland Dodge, however, favored Venustiano Carranza, head of the Constitutionalists, as did Samuel Gompers and the American Federation of Labor. American oil interests also preferred Carranza, who controlled many of the oil-producing areas in northeast Mexico. They also hoped to benefit if Carranza ousted Huerta, who had the backing of rival British oil companies. The expatriate American business community in Mexico City supported Huerta, but Wilson largely ignored them because he did not trust anyone who supported Huerta. No significant international business group supported another contestant for power, Emiliano Zapata, most likely because he controlled a region in which there was no significant US business interest.[19]

Although Wilson did not trust reporting from businessmen with interests in Mexico because of their biases, he did

Venustiano Carranza, the leader of the Constitutionalists. (© Bettmann/CORBIS)

[17] New York *American*, 22 December 1913: 2. The original photo appeared in the *New York Tribune*, 1 September 1912, section 2. Details of this hoax appeared in Ferdinand Lundberg, *Imperial Hearst: A Social Biography*. (New York: Equinox Cooperative Press, 1936), 221.

[18] Wilson to Ralph Pulitzer, 2 March 1914, quoted in Arthur Link, *Woodrow Wilson: The New Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956), 83–84. Wilson also seemed to have liked the *New York Evening Post*. See James D. Startt, *Woodrow Wilson and the Press* (New York: Palgrave-MacMillan, 2004), 17. Wilson to Walter H. Page, 18 May 1914, PWW 30:42. Jerry W. Knudson, "John Reed: A Reporter in Revolutionary Mexico." *Journalism History* 29, 2 (Summer 2003): 60-61.

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read some of the reports businessmen sent to him or to his cabinet members, particularly if they came from men with ties to political allies or to Princeton.

One Princetonian businessman, John Silliman, actually enlisted as a representative. Silliman happened to be vice consul in Coahuila and had known Carranza before the revolution. Unfortunately for Wilson, his old colleague was a less-than-perfect choice. Silliman was timid and spoke Spanish so poorly that Carranza never took him seriously. Some of Carranza's staff began calling the envoy "silly man." In at least one case, Carranza made Silliman read one of Wilson's messages in Spanish to embarrass him. Nonetheless, Wilson kept him in his position, not wanting to humiliate him with a recall. Wilson judged that Silliman was doing a capable job just passing messages back and forth. The State Department, however, did send a translator to work with him.[20]

The US military was notably absent from Wilson's list of intelligence collectors. Their role, in the president's mind, was to plan the tactical details of the military operations they were ordered to undertake.

An important exception was Gen. Hugh Scott, commander of the Army's Southern Department. Wilson consulted Scott, but only about Villa and Carranza, especially since Scott had met Villa several times.

Wilson chose not to tap Scott's superior, Secretary of War Lindley Garrison, an officer the president did not know well. Garrison was chosen for the cabinet position only because Wilson's secretary, Tumulty, knew Garrison from service in the New Jersey state government. Garrison turned out to be a vocal hawk favoring military intervention in cabinet meetings, basing his comments and reports on information he received from officers stationed along the US-Mexican border. Garrison soon realized, however, that Wilson did not often take his advice on foreign policy questions. The secretary of war, like the generals he managed, was consigned to tactical and administrative issues on Mexico. [21]

Another exception was Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, who was a member of Wilson's inner circle.[22] Wilson knew him well and because Daniels, unlike Garrison, was not an interventionist, Wilson trusted his judgment. In addition, because the United States maintained a naval presence in Mexican ports, a practice begun by President Taft, Daniels was getting information from navy officers on the scene.[23]

Wilson had a strict view of his cabinet's role, and he expected its members to stay within the well-defined bounds of their departments. Thus, in keeping diplomatic and strategic initiatives in his office, even members Wilson trusted were isolated from decisionmaking on Mexico—and thus of no intelligence value to the president. For example, he complained to his fiance, Edith Galt, that his son-in-law, Secretary of the Treasury William McAdoo, was trying to influ-

[19] William K. Meyers, "Pancho Villa and the Multinationals: United States Mining Interests in Villista Mexico, 1913-1915," *Journal of Latin American Studies*, 23 (1991):347; Robert L. Daniel, "The Friendship of Woodrow Wilson and Cleveland H. Dodge," *Mid-America* 43 (1961):190–91; Gregg Andrews, *Shoulder to Shoulder? The American Federation of Labor, The United States, and the Mexican Revolution, 1910–1924* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 34; Samuel Gompers, *Seventy Years of Life and Labor: An Autobiography* (New York: Augustus M. Kelly, 1967) 2: 311–13.

[20] Hill, 210–14. Silliman was promoted to full consul in 1914; *Mexican Herald*, Mexico City and Veracruz, 28 April 1914: 1;12 May 1914: 1; 13 May 1914: 1.

[21] Robert Lansing to Woodrow Wilson, 31 August 1915, PWW 34:385; Wilson to Lansing, 31 August 1915, PWW 34:388; Richard D. Challener, *Admirals, Generals and American Foreign Policy, 1898–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

[22] Daniels had been a leader in Wilson's 1912 presidential election campaign.

[23] Wilson to Mrs. Galt, 23 June 1915, PWW 33:446.

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ence his Mexican policies, which were, in the president's words, "none of his business." Only Secretary of State Bryan and, to a lesser extent, Daniels advised Wilson on Mexico. Bryan was included because US policy toward Mexico was in his portfolio of duties.

IMINT and SIGINT, Lesser Players

Types of intelligence other than HUMINT and OSINT had only minor roles in informing Wilson's policies. IMINT was limited to ground photography used as tactical intelligence for the military.[24] In preparation for possible armed intervention in 1914, the US Navy sent officers into Mexico to photograph bridges and railways. One Marine officer even passed himself off as a US businessman writing a guide book for Mexico City and received a tour of the Mexican Presidential Palace and its defenses. These missions played no role in White House decisions.[25]

SIGINT play an important part, but it was largely a counterintelligence tool, used to monitor the activities of foreign intelligence services in the United States.

SIGINT played an important part, but it was largely a counterintelligence tool, used to monitor the activities of foreign intelligence services in the United States. It was limited at the time to tapping telephone lines and telegraph cables, and intercepting wireless radio communications. SIGINT, in contrast to Wilson's HUMINT and OSINT, came mostly through official channels, rather than through the informal ones Wilson had established.

SIGINT turned out to be especially useful in the spring of 1915 in preventing Huerta's return to Mexico from exile in Spain, to which he had fled in July 1914. The Germans, eager to embroil the United States in a war with Mexico, courted Huerta. In February 1915, a German naval officer, Captain Franz von Rintelen, visited Huerta in Spain and offered to back him in a counterrevolution. Encouraged by fighting then underway between Villa and Carranza, Huerta agreed to consider the idea and went to New York, landing on 12 April 1915. His reception by a crowd of Mexican supporters bolstered the former dictator's plans. He was greeted by admirers everywhere he went. The atmosphere, at least in the exile community, seemed to favor his return. [26]

Treasury Secretary William McAdoo's men tapped German and Austrian diplomatic telephones in Washington and New

[24] Aerial photography was possible and was under development in Europe, but it was not used in Mexico. For a history of its development, see Terrence J. Finnegan, *Shooting the Front: Allied Aerial Reconnaissance and Photographic Interpretation on the Western Front—World War I* (Washington, DC: National Defense Intelligence College Press, 2006).

[25] Legendary Marine officer Smedley Butler played the businessman in Mexico City. In effect, he was an early non-official cover officer. The ground photographs of the areas around Tampico and Veracruz are in the Office of Naval Intelligence files, Lot 2428, Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division.

[26] George J. Rausch, Jr., "The Exile and Death of Victoriano Huerta," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 42 (1962):134–35.; Franz Rintelen von Kleist, *The Dark Invader: Wartime Reminiscences of a German Naval Intelligence Officer* (London: Lovat Dickson, 1933), 175–77. Captain Rintelen claims to have walked up to Huerta in a New York hotel lobby and introduced himself, but his self-aggrandizing memoirs are misleading. It is more likely he met Huerta in Spain while arranging passage to the United States.

Gen. Victoriano Huerta (center) on his arrival in New York City. (Bettmann/CORBIS)

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Because Wilson insisted on concrete information before acting, he was frustrated by the lack of definitive information.

York and relayed the reports to Wilson. These reports focused more on the activities of German and Austrian diplomats and their possible complicity in sabotage in the United States than they did on Mexico, but they did include information about German plotting in Mexico.[27]

By 24 June 1915, mistakenly thinking he had shaken pursuers, Huerta boarded a train in New York bound for San Francisco, switching later to one for El Paso. At the same time, Villa's representative in Washington reported to the Wilson administration that numerous former *Huertista* officers were on their way to El Paso from places of exile in the United States. The next day, United States marshals arrested Huerta as he stepped from his train in Newman, Texas, only a few miles from the border. Supporters waiting in a car to drive him across the border were also arrested.[28]

[27] Barbara Tuchman, *The Zimmerman Telegram* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1963), 77–80; Rausch, 134–37; Henry Landau, *The Enemy Within: The Inside Story of German Sabotage in America* (New York: G. Putnam's Sons, 1937), 48–49.

[28] Rausch, 138–39; New York *World*, 28 June 1915: 1; Henry Thayer Mahoney and Marjorie Locke Mahoney, *Espionage in Mexico: The Twentieth Century* (San Francisco: Austin & Winfield, 1997), 96–99.

Officials in El Paso kept President Wilson informed through frequent cables. Zach Lamar Cobb, the US customs collector there, had built a small intelligence network of his own, including railroad employees. These sources reported Huerta's movements, which Cobb relayed to Washington. Cobb also organized the group that arrested Huerta. Once Huerta was arrested, Wilson ordered the Justice Department to detained him and keep him from returning to Mexico, orders the department followed until Huerta's death in custody from complications of alcoholism.[29]

SIGINT thus provided "actionable" information about Huerta's plotting just as Hale's HUMINT had given the president the information he needed to dismiss a US ambassador. Wilson's other sources provided less definitive information. Some reports improved his awareness of key issues, most notably land reform. However, much of the reporting simply made him cautious in choosing one factional leader over another. In his notes to Secretary of State Bryan, Wilson demonstrated a willingness to recognize whichever revolutionary faction could demonstrate that it had gained Mexican public support.

[29] John F. Chalkley, "Zach Lamar Cobb," Southwestern Studies No. 103 (El Paso: Texas Western Press, 1998), 29–34; Wilson to Rudolp Forster, 28 June 1915 and Wilson to William Bauchop Wilson, 5 July 1915, PWW 33, 456, 473.

Wishing for More Information

However, until late 1915 the information Wilson was receiving could not help him come to a conclusion. For example, Wilson once complained that US consuls reporting from Mexico "sent me only a small batch of 'flimsies' [telegrams printed on very thin paper] and they contained nothing but multiplied details—and very small details at that—of the chaos that is Mexico."

In all likelihood, Wilson's ambivalence was also influenced by the efforts of those vying for power in Mexico. The Mexicans were well aware of Wilson's actions and each political and military faction did its best to influence his interpretation of events, through lobbying, personal contacts, and in the US press. Huerta had considerable support in the United States, especially among business leaders, but Wilson's negative opinion of Huerta was firmly set. Carranza and Villa, however, both had fairly sophisticated public relations campaigns aimed at the United States and the White House. Carranza had a press office in New York and Washington DC, which issued regular releases to reporters and to members of

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Congress. Villa encouraged reporters, like Reed, who gave him favorable coverage, and his military train included a press car in which reporters could sleep and eat. He also allowed them to use the Mexican telegraph system, often free of charge, to contact newspapers at home.

Because Wilson insisted on concrete information before acting, he was frustrated by the lack of definitive reporting. As he would tell Edith Galt, "The fact is, I never have had any patience with 'ifs' and conjectural cases. My mind insists always upon waiting until something actually does happen and then discussing what is to be done about that."[30]

Wilson's frustration with the lack of actionable intelligence is neither hard to understand not uncommon to presidents, as they and other policymakers often expect and demand more from intelligence than it can deliver.[31] To be fair to Wilson's sources, it was not until 1915 that any faction in Mexico gained enough dominance to legitimately earn US recognition.

In the end, Wilson's system produced mixed results, with more problems than would be acceptable in a professionalized system.

Lack of definitive judgments on Wilson's part reflected the lack of a stable reality on the ground. By late summer 1915, however, it was clear that Carranza led the most powerful revolutionary faction, and, in October 1915, Wilson extended recognition to Carranza's government.

An Assessment of Wilson's System

In the end, Wilson's system produced mixed results, with more problems than would be acceptable in a professionalized system. Wilson received a lot of good information, particularly from American reporters in Mexico and from the US consuls who had built personal ties to Mexico's revolutionary leaders. Wilson did trust some official State Department reporting, but only from sources that seemed to him to be accurate.

The informality of Wilson's system made his method cumbersome, but, possibly worse, his approach to assessing the reliability of reports by determining its consistency with other facts was itself unreliable. As future intelligence failures would demonstrate, Wilson was wrong to believe that only the truth could be consistent. Falsehoods we now know can also seem logical and factually consistent if key contradictory information remains unknown, ignored, or analyzed on the basis of faulty assumptions.

Fortunately for Wilson, his initial assumption that Huerta's government lacked popular support relative to the Constitutionalist revolutionaries was based on accurate information—including the New York *World's* reporting—and so provided a firm foundation for judging later information. The quality of the *World's* reporting helped Wilson. In hindsight it appears to have been accurate in comparison to other major US newspapers, the Hearst chain in particular. Had Wilson based his judgments on the reporting of Ambassador Wilson or on the Hearst newspapers, his system would have served only to reinforce erroneous assumptions.[32]

Wilson tapped sources that were diverse, decentralized, and with different kinds of expertise. Because of this variety, no one source could dominate Wilson's thinking and he was able to avoid the traps of groupthink. Because Wilson's policies were still forming, he also heard different viewpoints about the Mexican factions,

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[30] Wilson to Mrs. Galt, 17 August 1915, PWW 34:231; Quoted in Robert W. Tucker, "An Inner Circle of One," *The National Interest* 51 (1998): 25; See *Revolution by Headline* and Mark T. Gilderhus, *Diplomacy and Revolution: U.S.-Mexican Relations under Wilson and Carranza.* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977), 6.

[31] See Richard Betts, *Enemies of Intelligence: Knowledge and Power in American National Security* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007) and a review of the book in this issue by Nicholas Dujmovic.

[32] Hill, 189–92, 212–15.

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Wilson learned from his efforts to understand events in Mexico, including the lesson that foreign information had to come from more places than the usual State Department channels.

although he did ignore most of Huerta's supporters. The end result of this information flow may have been chaotic, but it gave Wilson a wide range of opinions and information.

Wilson was also sensitive to the proclivity of his sources to suggest policy. Although he sometimes took that advice—as he did Lind's urging to occupy Veracruz in early 1914—in general, Wilson dismissed the policy suggestions of his reporters.

After World War I ended, Wilson took another approach to gathering intelligence and created a new organization, the Inquiry, to pull together information and provide analysis on the issues raised at the Versailles Peace Conference. The Inquiry consisted of area experts—including members of the military, academics, and reporters—who knew the different regions and populations affected by the war.

In establishing the Inquiry, Wilson elected to use a more formal structure of intelligence collection and analytic expertise than he had employed in trying to understand Mexico. The Inquiry was disbanded immediately after the Versailles conference ended, but it demonstrated that Wilson had learned from his efforts to understand events in Mexico, including the lesson that foreign information had to come from more places than the usual State Department channels.[33]

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[33] See Lawrence E. Glefand, *"The Inquiry": American Preparations for Peace, 1917-1919* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press Reprint, 1976).

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